

WASHINGTON IN BRIEF

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Senate Approves Patriot Act Provisions

Congress's months-long debate over how to reshape and renew the USA Patriot Act neared an end yesterday as the Senate approved a bill that would add safeguards for library records and other items that federal agents might want to review in secret.

Senators said they hope to complete action today on the legislative package, which would renew the act for four years in its revised form. Legislative leaders said the House plans to approve the legislation Tuesday and send it to President Bush.

When Congress passed the law soon after the 2001 terrorist attacks, lawmakers arranged for key elements to expire after four years unless it voted to renew them after a review. The law made it easier for federal agents to secretly tap phones, obtain library and bank records, and search suspected terrorists' homes.

The Bush administration says the law helps fight terrorism, but some civil libertarians say it allows agents too much leeway to spy on innocent Americans and their records, sometimes including library items. Last year, many congressional Democrats and a handful of Republicans insisted that several civil liberties safeguards be added before the law's expired provisions could be renewed. That coalition managed to block Senate action for months until the administration and GOP leaders agreed to some of its demands.

The compromise makes two changes to National Security Letters, which are subpoenas for financial and electronic records that do not require a judge's approval. Libraries functioning "in their traditional capacity" will no longer be subject to such letters.

The legislation also revises "Section 215 subpoenas," which are granted by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act court. Recipients will have the explicit right to challenge the subpoenas' nondisclosure or "gag order" requirements, although critics say such appeals will be difficult to win.

The Senate voted 95 to 4 to approve the modifications. Voting no were Sen. Russell Feingold (D-Wis.), the chief opponent of the law, and Sens. Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.), James M. Jeffords (I-Vt.) and Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), all of whom said the civil liberties safeguards were insufficient. Sen. Daniel K. Inouye (D-Hawaii) did not vote.